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Outsourced Propaganda: The Role of Journalists in China's Government Social Media

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Abstract

This research explores an underexamined aspect of government communication—the role of journalists as outsourced propaganda content producers in the Chinese context. Based on 15 semi-structured interviews with journalists who have first-hand experience managing outsourced government social media accounts, and grounded in boundary work theory, this study examines how journalists navigate the tension between journalism and propaganda in relation to their role identity, work routines, and professional values. Findings reveal that outsourced journalists, often referred to as *Xiaobian*, occupy a contested hybrid position. Their identity negotiation is constrained by dual pressures from both government agencies and news organizations, leaving limited room for professional autonomy. In their daily practices, bureaucratic logic takes precedence over journalistic logic, intensifying the tension between serving the state and serving the public. These dynamics highlight journalism's boundary crossing in the digital era, shaped by changing economic and political conditions within the media landscape.

Keywords

boundary work; China; government communication; journalism; propaganda; social media

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technologies, social media has emerged as an important force reshaping the communication ecosystem between governments and their citizens (Guo et al., 2025; Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Governments around the world increasingly utilize social media not only to disseminate information but also to engage with citizens and communities, fostering transparency and responsiveness (Criado et al., 2013; DePaula et al., 2018). The adoption of social media by governments is

often regarded as a marker of democracy and modernity, contributing to the development of digital and smart governance (Bonsón et al., 2016; Janowski, 2015). Additionally, social media serves as a public forum for citizens to participate in public discussion, facilitating government deliberation and indicating the growth of civil society (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Yuan et al., 2023). However, some less optimistic scholars contend that social media can be an instrument of repression in the hands of autocrats, further restricting social and political liberty (Roberts & Oosterom, 2024). While previous studies have primarily examined government social media adoption and influences, little attention has been given to the producers of government messaging, especially those working outside the formal government structures, limiting our understanding of the operational dynamics behind government social media. This study addresses this gap by exploring how journalists in China are outsourced to manage and produce content for government social media accounts.

Like governments worldwide, the Chinese government, from the central to the local, has placed considerable emphasis on adopting and managing social media (Yuan et al., 2023). On the one hand, the government tightens censorship on social media to silence dissenting voices and limit collective action through more sophisticated technological systems (Tai & Fu, 2020). On the other hand, the government also actively engages in the social media sphere by establishing official accounts to amplify its agenda and shape public discourse (Guo et al., 2025). In early 2013, the central government underscored the significance of social media as a new channel of government communication, promoting information dissemination and public engagement aimed at enhancing public trust and maintaining political legitimacy (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). As of 2024, over 90,000 government Weibo accounts (China Internet Network Information Center, 2025) and 500,000 government WeChat accounts (Xie, 2024) have been launched across the country, covering various government levels and divisions. Due to constraints in human resources and professional expertise, government agencies tend to outsource the operation of their social media accounts to media organizations, enlisting journalists to work on government communication on their behalf (Xie, 2024). Simultaneously, traditionally functioning as mouthpieces of the government or "watchdog on Party's leashes" (Zhao, 2000), Chinese state media has also been embracing social media and restyling "hard propaganda" to "soft propaganda," producing entertaining and aesthetic content for social media users (Zhu & Fu, 2024; Zou, 2021). Beyond opening press-owned social media accounts, news organizations also outsource their journalistic staff to assist the government's march in the online world. While existing studies have identified the collaborative relationship between media organizations and government agencies in government communication (Wang, 2023), few empirical studies have examined the daily practices of contracted and outsourced journalists in this context. As professional content producers, journalists play an important role in mediating messages, framing narratives, and constructing discourses. Their practices directly influence the effectiveness of government communication and shape public perceptions of government performance. Meanwhile, in the Chinese context, the boundaries between journalism, public relations (PR), and propaganda are increasingly blurred and contested, rendering journalistic roles both volatile and complex (Guan et al., 2017; Wang & Li, 2024). Studying the tensions experienced by journalists in this space not only sheds light on how government communication is being restructured amid intensified political control and accelerated digital transformation but also provides insights into evolving media-state relations and the redefinition of boundaries of journalism in semi-authoritarian systems.

The study begins with a review of government social media and theoretical discussions on boundary work and Chinese media. Next, after detailing the method of the research, we present our analysis and research findings, examining how outsourced journalists operate government social media and negotiate the intersection of

bureaucratic and journalistic boundaries. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and the broader significance of journalistic involvement in government communication.

2. Government Social Media and the Chinese Context

With the rapid advancement of digital infrastructure and the widespread adoption of the internet, social media has become an essential tool in government communication, contributing to the rise of e-government and digital government (Janowski, 2015; Khan et al., 2020). Due to its immediacy and interactivity, social media has reshaped the relationship between individuals, communities, and various levels of government (DePaula et al., 2018). For governments, it serves as a modern channel for information dissemination and service provision, symbolizing efficiency and transparency (Bonsón et al., 2016). Simultaneously, it empowers citizens to actively participate in addressing social issues, fostering collaborative governance (Criado & Villodre, 2023; Linders, 2012). Existing studies on government social media may be observed from the perspectives of governments or citizens.

From the governmental standpoint, scholars have explored social media adoption at various administrative levels, examining influencing factors, implementation practices, and content characteristics. Criado and Villodre (2021) argue that goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration often drive public administration's social media adoption. Through social media, local governments can become more transparent and accessible, encouraging greater public engagement in civic affairs (Gao & Lee, 2017). It is believed that social media could foster a sense of connectedness between governments and citizens, enabling two-way, dialogic relationships that contribute to political legitimacy (Bonsón et al., 2016; Criado & Villodre, 2021). Many developed countries leverage social media to enhance open government practices, increase transparency, and build public trust (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). However, there are also scholars who criticize this dynamic for creating an omnipresent public and an omnipresent administration, suggesting that the emphasis on constant visibility and interaction prioritizes performative engagement over meaningful, collaborative problem-solving (Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). Some scholars further contend that social media can be used by authoritarian governments as a tool for disseminating propaganda, creating distractions, and spreading misinformation to promote the policies of a political party (DePaula & Hansson, 2025) and to maintain authoritarian control (Dal & Nisbet, 2022).

From the citizen perspective, scholarship has concentrated on examining public perceptions of government social media, particularly the effects and outcomes of government communication. Studies indicate that civic engagement through social media can significantly increase institutional trust while simultaneously amplifying citizens' demands for civic action to address social issues (Criado & Villodre, 2023; Warren et al., 2014). Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) contend that citizen participation in government social media facilitates the emergence of civil society and a vibrant public sphere. However, it is also found that public engagement with government platforms often falls short of expectations. For example, a notable decline in public interaction with local governments is typically observed after elections (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Additionally, only a minority of individuals prefer communicating with the government through social media and their participation often lacks interactivity (Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). This reluctance may stem from a disconnect between what local governments offer on social media and citizens' expectations (Criado & Villodre, 2023). Moreover, clickbait titles, excessively lengthy content, and repetitive information contribute to information avoidance behavior which is also found to correlate with citizens' perceptions of

governmental transparency, responsiveness, and their overall sentiment toward government (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018).

Existing studies predominantly focus on liberal democratic societies where government-citizen interactions on social media are often perceived as enhancing democracy (Bonsón et al., 2016). In contrast, studies on (semi-)authoritarian contexts remain limited, often overlooking the fact that social media does not solely facilitate democratic engagement; it can also be harnessed to advance digital authoritarianism (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). Particularly in China, a single-party regime, social media is not only a channel for information dissemination but also a tool for propaganda aimed at cultivating compliant citizen behaviors (Chen et al., 2024). Although critical perspectives on government use of social media have emerged (Hansson & Page, 2023; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014), the literature on government communication has yet to fully explore how government social media is managed and operated in practice, particularly in the context of increasing state-sponsored disinformation which has had global repercussions (Echeverría et al., 2025). Moreover, existing studies tend to operate under the assumption that government communication involves only governments and citizens, leaving the potential role of third-party actors in the production process underexplored. This oversight hinders a comprehensive understanding of government communication. Consequently, it is essential to explore the roles and positions these actors occupy and how they shape the dynamics of government-citizen interaction.

Unlike Western liberal societies, where journalism enjoys a high degree of autonomy and remains distinct from government communication, Chinese journalism, operating under a one-party semi-authoritarian regime, is subject to strong state intervention (Guan et al., 2017; Zhao, 2000). Previous studies have shown that, as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, state media have played a significant role in propaganda across various historical periods (Wang, 2016; Xu & He, 2024). In the digital era, many media organizations have adapted their propaganda styles and strategies, marking a shift toward "soft propaganda" (Zhu & Fu, 2024; Zou, 2021). More recently, the Chinese government has moved beyond traditional media, placing significant emphasis on using social media for government communication, viewing it as a more effective means of advancing digital governance and enhancing political messaging. WeChat, the country's largest social media platform, boasts over one billion monthly active users and is considered one of the most influential communication channels in China. Since 2012, WeChat has offered a subscription account feature (*Weixin Gongzhonghao*), which not only enables individuals to become content creators or *Zimeiti* (personal media) operators (Fang, 2021), thereby fostering a decentralized media environment, but also allows organizations—including government agencies—to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and directly disseminate information. Weibo, similar to X (formerly Twitter), has nearly 600 million monthly active users and serves as another major platform. Its decentralized and open architecture facilitates limited political engagement and public expression, even within China's restrictive communicative environment (Wu, 2018).

Recent statistics indicate that more than 90,000 government-affiliated accounts have been launched across Weibo and WeChat (China Internet Network Information Center, 2025). However, due to a shortage of personnel and expertise in social media management, many Chinese government departments have outsourced the operation of their social media accounts to news organizations. At the same time, media outlets are grappling with structural challenges brought about by digital transformation, including declining readership and advertising revenues since the end of the "golden age" (Wang & Sparks, 2019). In response, legacy media have sought new strategies to transform their business models and generate income (Long &

Shao, 2021). Collaborating with government agencies to manage official social media accounts has emerged as a strategy not only to strengthen ties with the government but also to establish a new revenue stream (Xu & He, 2024). Recent studies suggest that providing diversified outsourced services to governments has become an innovative approach for party newspapers (Long & Shao, 2021; Xu & He, 2024). However, little is known about how these services are operationalized or how they influence government communication. This study offers insights into this issue by examining the mechanisms of outsourced government social media operations, with a particular focus on the role of journalists in government communication through the lens of boundary work.

3. Boundary Work in Journalism

3. Boundary Work in Journalism Boundary work was originally conceptualized to examine how scientists establish their legitimacy as knowledge producers, distinguishing themselves from religion and pseudoscience (Gieryn, 1983). In the field of journalism, journalists' boundary work often revolves around three key domains: participation (who qualifies as a journalist); practices (what constitutes journalistic work); and professionalism (how journalists establish a distinct community with specialized knowledge; Carlson, 2015). These boundaries are not stable, pre-determined structures but rather contextual and fluid cultural constructions requiring constant negotiation (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 391).

The rise of digital technology, particularly social media, has intensified debate over journalistic boundaries leading to the emergence of terms such as "blurring boundaries" (Liu & Berkowitz, 2020; Loosen, 2015) and "shifting boundaries" (Blaagaard, 2013; Cheng & Tandoc, 2022). One of the most significant boundary works in journalism concerns the identity of participating actors. The rise of citizen journalism and participatory journalism has challenged traditional notions of journalistic authority as non-professionals engage in news production (Blaagaard, 2013). Konieczna et al. (2018) suggest that journalists see citizen participation as a supplement to professional journalism practices rather than giving it intrinsic worth for its own sake. Hamm (2024) highlights how collaborations between citizens, scientists, and journalists are producing new forms of news objects, ultimately contributing to the empowerment of both journalism and the public. At the same time, numerous peripheral actors have emerged in the field of journalism, including mobile app designers, programmers, and web analytics managers, all of whom increasingly influence the process of news production (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). Although these interlopers play an expanding role in journalism, they remain excluded from traditional definitions of journalistic actors and are often viewed as dissolving established metajournalistic discourse (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2023; Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). This expansion of journalistic participation reflects a broader trend of boundary negotiation where legitimacy is contested and redefined in response to technological and societal transformations.

A second dimension of boundary work in journalism involves defining what constitutes journalistic practice. In the context of ongoing economic crises, journalists are often required to take on non-editorial tasks such as producing off-agenda content to secure funding from private foundations (Scott et al., 2019). The expansion of journalistic boundaries is shaped not only by technological disruption and economic pressures (Wang, 2023) but also by increasing political polarization (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2023). For instance, investigative journalists in Latin America must incorporate personal security measures into their daily routines as a means of self-protection in politically hostile environments (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2023). Meanwhile, in China, political journalists increasingly face the new requirement of serving as policy

consultants for the government, acting as think tanks alongside their regular news reporting duties, reflecting the deepening symbiotic relationship between the press and the state (Wang & Yin, 2024). These adaptations illustrate the dynamism of boundary work, demonstrating how journalistic practices are shaped and reshaped in response to external pressures.

In terms of professionalism, journalism as a distinct profession is increasingly disrupted by the convergence of communication fields. Prior research has highlighted the blurring boundaries between journalism and PR, a process often referred to as the "PR-ization" of the media (Macnamara, 2016; Weder et al., 2023). Shifting professional conditions have prompted many journalists to transition into PR, a domain that requires similar skills and thus facilitates role negotiation (Fisher, 2016). Freelance journalists who simultaneously work in PR often experience dual-role conflicts (Viererbl & Koch, 2021). To navigate these tensions, they tend to adopt preventative strategies aimed at avoiding inter-role conflict such as separating topics, selectively choosing clients, and employing passive shielding techniques. When such strategies fail or are not feasible, they may instead merge professional roles, downplay their PR work, or deflect responsibility as a way of managing these conflicts (Fröhlich et al., 2013). Even journalists who fully transition into PR roles often retain a journalistic self-conception which can clash with the professional norms and expectations specific to PR (Viererbl & Koch, 2021). Although moonlighting staff frequently perceive themselves primarily as journalists (Fröhlich et al., 2013), their work practices increasingly reflect features of professional convergence, signaling a broader erosion of boundaries between journalistic and PR roles (Weder et al., 2023).

The boundaries of Chinese journalism are shaped by the interplay of state intervention, market commercialization, and technological innovation. Due to stringent media control, the scope of investigative journalism is severely restricted (Tong, 2019), leading to an increasing tolerance for the embrace of PR practices (Qiu & Lou, 2022). In response to declining advertising revenues and readership, the distinction between editorial and commercial spheres has become blurred, illustrating that journalists are increasingly subordinated to the demands of revenue generation rather than prioritizing news reporting (Wang & Sparks, 2019). By incorporating reflexivity and transparency into their reporting practices, investigative journalists continue to negotiate and articulate their professional identities (Meng & Zhang, 2022). The rise of digital media has further diminished journalists' ability to defend these boundaries with journalists now positioned as both custodians of professionalism and marginalized voices in shaping public opinion (Wang & Li, 2024). Confronted with these pressures, Chinese journalism's boundary work remains a dynamic and competitive process. This boundary negotiation is particularly demanding among outsourced journalists who are responsible for managing government social media accounts. Drawing on boundary work theory, this study sought to explore how journalists negotiate their professional role within the bureaucratic political sphere. Specifically, two research questions were asked:

> RQ1: How do journalists operate outsourced government social media?
>
> RQ2: How do journalists negotiate the boundaries between politics and journalism during these processes?

4. Method

To address the research questions, this study adopted semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the research method. The study focuses on Group Z, a major media conglomerate located in a southeastern city in China that hosts 16 outlets: nine newspapers, five magazines, and two news apps. Since 2015, this media group has provided services for managing government-affiliated social media accounts. Located in one of China's most economically developed cities, where the government places significant emphasis on the development of official social media, Group Z plays a key role in outsourcing journalists to assist with government communication. By 2024, statistics indicated that 297 government-operated social media accounts were active in the city, ranking among the highest in the country. Among these, WeChat accounts are particularly prominent. One notable example is the WeChat account of a local health department, which has amassed nearly 10 million followers. The widespread outsourcing of these accounts to Group Z underscores the involvement of journalistic professionals in producing content for government social media. These dynamics make Group Z an ideal research site for examining outsourced government social media operations.

4.1. Data Collection

According to the ranking of government social media accounts released by Group Z every month, we identified 45 outsourced journalistic professionals. The interviews were conducted from February 2024 to January 2025 through a snowball sampling approach. One of the authors who had a similar experience of operating government social media first reached five participants through a working connection and then conducted the interviews. After the interviews, participants were invited to recommend other colleagues or friends who were also operating government social media. Ultimately, 15 of them, all with direct experience in operating government-affiliated social media, accepted our interview invitations.

To accommodate their personal situation and anonymity needs, five interviews were conducted in person and 10 via WeChat voice calls. Notably, two-thirds of the interviewees were female, reflecting the gender composition of this cohort as shown in the previous research (Chen, 2025). The interview guidelines focused on interviewees' experience in operating government social media, exploring three key topics: (a) daily practices, such as "how do you select topics for government social media?" and "what factors influence your decision?"; (b) identity perception, such as "do you consider yourself a journalist? Why or why not?"; and (c) understanding of government social media, such as "do you think government social media is helpful to citizens? Why or why not?" Interviews ranged from 32 to 76 minutes and were recorded with participant consent. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. For those (three participants) who preferred not to be audio recorded, we kept notes as much as we could.

4.2. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed to analyze the data. First, all the transcripts and notes were repeatedly read by two authors using the three-dimensional framework of journalistic boundary work (Carlson, 2015) and research questions as the initial code. After restructuring the transcripts, the researchers read them again to identify more concrete and specific themes that repeatedly emerged. This ultimately allowed the transcripts to be organized into three categories: (a) identity, (b) practice, and (c) professionalism. To better understand journalists' boundary work and their experience, we outline the

cooperation models at the beginning and their professional positioning at the end. To preserve contextual nuance, transcripts were analyzed in Chinese. Representative excerpts were lightly edited for clarity (e.g., removing stutters or repeated words), translated into English, and included in the findings as direct quotations. For anonymity, participants are identified as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, and so on.

5. Findings

5.1. The Context of Outsourced Government Social Media

The role of media in managing government social media accounts is closely linked to the decline in advertising revenues: "The press needs to survive first and be self-sustaining, so they need to expand their business. Running government social media is a 'one stone two birds' act" (Interviewee 9). The government's need to develop its social media presence and the media's need to explore new revenue streams and align with power have become increasingly intertwined, leading to the wider adoption of outsourced management of government social media.

Local governments typically adopt a "service procurement model" to outsource social media operations to media organizations. In this arrangement, the government functions as the "client" (*jiafang*), while media organizations serve as service providers (*yifang*) offering tailored solutions to meet the government's communication needs. As Interviewee 5 explained, under this model, "The government may simply view us as a vendor, and our role is to deliver high-quality services to meet the client's needs." Contracts for such projects are typically signed on an annual basis, adopting either the one-to-one or one-to-many model.

The one-to-one service model operates in two steps. First, government agencies in need of social media operation services initiate a public bidding process. The winning bidder, often a media organization, assigns a journalist to work directly within the government unit handling the daily operation of its social media accounts. In this model, one journalist serves one government department. Their responsibilities typically include information gathering, content production, visual design, and audience engagement. Government clients under this model in Group Z range from municipal, district, sub-district, to community levels, covering sectors such as education, law, and culture. In their daily routines, the outsourced journalists are primarily accountable to government agencies rather than their media organizations.

The one-to-many model refers to one journalist operating multiple government-outsourced social media accounts simultaneously. These journalists generally work within their media organizations and communicate with government departments remotely. The number of accounts assigned to each journalist depends on the profitability of the projects they manage. News organizations typically establish key performance indicators for journalists to meet. Among our interviewees, the busiest journalist (Interviewee 6) was responsible for operating four WeChat accounts affiliated with different government departments. Managing multiple accounts was perceived by outsourced journalists as a sign of competitiveness and profitability. Compared to their counterparts in the one-to-one model, journalists operating under the one-to-many model receive greater support from their news organizations.

Whether the government adopts a one-to-one or one-to-many collaboration model when outsourcing services to news organizations depends on its budget and the priority it places on social media adoption. In our case, City Z, where funding is relatively abundant, most government agencies prefer the one-to-one model. Three-quarters of our interviewees serve in the one-to-one model, aligning with the choice of governments.

5.2. Negotiating Boundaries

Carlson (2015, p. 9) suggests that there are "three areas of journalism around which boundary work occurs: participants, practices, and professionalism." Our research reveals that outsourced journalists operating government social media accounts occupy an intermediary position between news organizations and governmental institutions, requiring them to navigate tensions related to identity, practices, and professionalism.

5.2.1. Identity: "I am a *Xiaobian*, not a Journalist"

In the narratives of outsourced journalists, they often refer to themselves as *Xiaobian*, a term meaning "little editor." This title describes someone exclusively responsible for content production on social media. However, this label carries an identity tension due to its ambiguous connotation. Interviewee 9, who has worked in one-to-one service, noted:

> When working as a *Xiaobian*, I still feel like a journalist in my heart. I believe my content should serve the public. But the government simply treats us as service providers, here to cater to the "client-daddy" [*jiafang baba*]. Even though we perform journalistic tasks like interviewing, editing, and photography, they do not see us as real journalists.

Previous research shows that journalists assert their legitimacy as participants in the journalistic field by excluding user-generated content creators as non-professionals (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014). However, in our case, outsourced journalists are institutionally categorized as *Xiaobian*—a term devoid of formal journalistic status. This demonstrates that the boundary work of journalists is not solely determined by journalists themselves but is also shaped by external factors, such as government regulations. Over time, these outsourced workers gradually internalize this redefinition. As Interviewee 15 stated: "I am just a *Xiaobian*, not a journalist." The negotiation of role definition is dominated by the collaborative relationship with the government. While outsourced journalists view themselves as journalists, government officials persistently perceive them as *Xiaobian*—mere service providers.

Consequently, non-journalistic tasks are assigned to *Xiaobian* due to their placement within government offices. As Interviewee 7 expressed: "They assign additional tasks, such as drafting documents for the office or writing speeches for leaders' meetings. Is this part of our responsibilities?" This ambiguity regarding job scope creates confusion among outsourced journalists. Moreover, some government officials delegate even personal tasks to *Xiaobian*. For instance, Interviewee 10 recounted being asked to "prepare a PowerPoint presentation for a leader's thesis oral defense"—a request she found troubling. Refusing such tasks is challenging because they are service providers who need to fulfill clients' demands despite their deviation from contractual agreements. As Interviewee 10 reflected: "I often wonder why I am being asked to do this when it is not part of my agreed job responsibilities."

Due to their long-term assignments within government offices, *Xiaobian* who provide one-to-one service face dual marginalization. They are marginalized within their news organizations while simultaneously struggling to integrate into government units, resulting in contested positions. Interviewee 9 described this situation:

> We are contracted by the news organization but work within government units. The government staff do not treat us as insiders, making it difficult for us to integrate. Meanwhile, we rarely return to the press, so we are not familiar with our colleagues there either. We are outsiders for both.

However, for news organizations, embedding staff in government agencies serves as a lucrative strategy. As Interviewee 5 explained:

> The key point of embedding someone in the government department is to build close relations with clients to secure more revenue for the press. Apart from managing social media, various projects need to be outsourced, such as producing videos and organizing events, which are more profitable due to their short-term nature.

Similarly, one-to-many services prioritize cost-efficient profit generation. According to Interviewee 8, revenue from managing outsourced government social media accounts constitutes nearly 25% of the newspaper's annual income.

In short, outsourced journalists, also known as *Xiaobian*, occupy a contested in-between position. Their identity negotiation is constrained by dual pressures from both the government and news organizations leaving limited room for professional autonomy in their daily practices.

5.2.2. Practices: Prioritizing Political Safety Versus Communication Effect

As in-betweeners, *Xiaobian* must navigate the tension between stressing political safety and communication effects. The content published on social media represents the voice of the government, so it must be "safe"—meaning it complies with political censorship and avoids causing any negative impact on the government or the Chinese Communist Party. In this context, maintaining the journalistic boundaries is particularly challenging for *Xiaobian*:

> They want a high readership, but the content must also be "glorious, correct, and aligned with the Party's values." At the same time, we can't use memes or humor or just post something casually. I don't have much choice—if I push back and insist that a piece of content is well-written, it might get rejected in the third round of review, and I'll have to start over. (Interviewee 1)

Normally, the content undergoes more than three rounds of review before being published on government social media, ensuring that there are no political risks. The contents are initially reviewed by the senior editors in the news organizations, and subsequently, they are reviewed by government officials. Sometimes, after completing content writing and formatting, *Xiaobian* misses the optimal publishing time while waiting for multiple rounds of review, ultimately leading to low readership. As interviewee 10 explained, "It is common for an article to go through seven or eight people, each with different opinions, leading to repeated revisions. This constant back-and-forth is just part of the routine." Conflicts often arise between newspaper

editors and government officials during the review process. As Interviewee 15 described, these contradictions reflect differing priorities and expectations:

> A senior editor in the press suggests revisions from a professional journalism perspective, such as shortening sentences for clarity. However, when the edited version reaches the government side, they often request changes that restore the original phrasing. Caught between these conflicting demands, I often feel torn—who should I listen to? I try to persuade the government side, but in the end, their decision prevails, and I have no choice but to add back what was previously removed.

In digital communication, concise sentence structures are generally considered more effective for social media dissemination, as they enhance readability and engagement. However, in the context of outsourced government-affiliated media accounts, these professional considerations often yield to bureaucratic requirements. This dynamic reflects the hierarchical relationship between outsourced journalists and government officials, where the latter are perceived as the ultimate decision-makers and compliance with their demands takes precedence over professional judgment. While *Xiaobian* may initially attempt to uphold journalistic standards, repeated experiences of editorial intervention and the lack of agency in decision-making lead to a pragmatic resignation. Rather than insisting on professional best practices, they adapt by prioritizing bureaucratic expectations, effectively internalizing their subordinate role within the institutional framework. Interviewee 9 said: "If change is not possible, adaptation becomes the only option." Moreover, they must reconcile that their work often goes almost unread:

> The article I write may only get a few dozen views, and even those are mostly from colleagues within my department. At first, it takes some getting used to, but after a while, I just stop feeling anything. This world simply needs somebody to function as an NPC [non-player character], generating textual garbage. (Interviewee 1)

This dynamic reflects the broader tension between professional journalistic values and bureaucratic priorities. *Xiaobian* often emphasize factors such as "communication effect" and "the social impact of a topic" (Interviewee 10) in aligning with professional pursuits that value audience engagement and public impact. However, for government officials overseeing media operations, these considerations are secondary. Their primary concern is not whether the content resonates with the public but whether it is successfully published and gains recognition from higher authorities. When government agencies set targets for readership or follower growth, but *Xiaobian* find themselves unable to achieve these goals through content improvements, they often resort to alternative strategies to meet the expectations of their clients. A common and accessible approach is leveraging personal networks for assistance. As Interviewee 6 explained:

> They required the readership to exceed 100, but in my experience, a third of the articles I managed did not reach that threshold. So, I had no choice but to share them with colleagues in my department or family and friends, asking them to help forward articles and boost the view count.

However, when it comes to followers' growth targets, *Xiaobian* often rely on the support of news organizations. Interviewee 8, who managed an outsourced social media account, was given a key performance indicator to increase followers by 30% within one year. Despite his efforts bringing the count close to the goal, he faced a dilemma as the contract neared its end: "With the deadline approaching and no other options left, the

press suggested, 'Let's just buy some followers.' " Similar "data optimization" strategies were also mentioned by Interviewee 11. High readership numbers and follower growth on social media accounts can serve as indicators of impressive performance for leadership, contributing to the positive image of government officials.

5.2.3. Professionalism: Serving the State Versus Serving the Public

According to the Chinese central government (2018), government social media accounts serve three primary functions: propagating the voice of the Chinese Communist Party and the government, encouraging citizen participation in governance, and providing public services. Together, these functions aim to enhance government transparency and foster interaction between citizens and the government. However, in practice, these objectives often translate into a struggle to negotiate the boundary of serving the state (upwards) and serving the public (downwards): "Most of the work done by the government aims to serve the upwards, ensuring that what they do is visible to the higher authorities. The rest is meant to serve the downwards, taking on the demands of the public" (Interviewee 5).

"Serving the upwards" refers to government social media functioning as a platform to showcase the achievements of government officials, enabling them to publicize their completed work. In this way, *Xiaobian* are performing the role of loyal facilitators, contributing to constructing a positive image of political elites (Wang & Li, 2024). "Serving the downwards" involves delivering information relevant to the public. These two functions often coexist. Interviewee 3 explained the reasons behind government social media becoming a channel for officials to highlight their performance:

> If an official successfully introduces a beneficial project, it becomes part of their performance record. They want their superiors to be aware of their accomplishments, but cannot report every detail directly. However, by publishing it on a government social media account, their leaders can easily see what they have done.

Since such propagandist contents, such as the meeting leaders just finished, are written in a formal and bureaucratic style, they tend to be unappealing to the public, ending up with "low readership" (Interviewee 3). However, officials insist on posting them even if they are read only about 20 times (Interviewee 6). In addition, there is limited room for *Xiaobian*, resulting in "highlighting official achievement from the government's perspective rather than from the citizens' perspective" (Interviewee 15). In this way, government social media has become a platform for officials to showcase their political achievements. As Interviewee 5 described, it serves as "the mouthpiece of the leadership, following their directives without question." Consequently, the genres and styles of content published on these platforms are heavily influenced by the personal preferences of government leaders. For instance, some leaders adopt a more conservative approach, prioritizing "serious content" (Interviewee 5), while others emphasize the effectiveness of publicity, encouraging *Xiaobian* to be innovative and engage more closely with the public. "It all depends on the attitudes and styles of the leaders," Interviewee 8 said.

Besides promoting the performance of the leadership, *Xiaobian* at the same time emphasize their role as disseminators and educators, contributing to informing and educating the public. Interviewee 8, who manages government WeChat subscription accounts affiliated with cultural departments, highlighted the educational role of government social media:

> The social media accounts I manage for museums or art galleries primarily focus on cultural public education. For example, we aim to craft eye-catching headlines to attract readers' attention, encouraging them to learn about upcoming exhibitions. The primary goal is to inform the public and subtly inspire them to visit the museum. Our content is more citizen-oriented, often promoting public events and educational activities, functioning as a role in public education. (Interviewee 8)

In this sense, *Xiaobian* prioritizes audience engagement by employing various tactics within their articles to encourage citizen interaction. For example, they use strategies such as "leave a comment at the end of the post for a chance to win a prize" and "we will select 20 readers' comments to receive free tickets to the performance" (Interviewee 2).

Another challenge outsourced journalists face is balancing their dual role of serving government affairs and engaging with the public. Their common strategy is selective effort allocation—deciding how much energy to invest based on the nature of the content rather than viewing the two roles as inherently conflicting. Some *Xiaobian* believe that these functions can coexist and consider both to be integral parts of their work: "Since I know readers aren't interested in content about internal meetings, I don't put much effort or thought into creating those types of articles. Instead, I focus more on content that has educational or public interest value" (Interviewee 8).

In the Chinese context, state-aligned media often operate under the dual pressures of political loyalty and public service. Government-affiliated social media editors, therefore, strategically allocate their efforts to maintain their professional identity while ensuring compliance with state directives. Through selective effort allocation, outsourced journalists minimize the impact of political propaganda on their professional identity while still fulfilling their role as educators and informing the public. At the same time, they legitimize the existence of outsourced government social media by adding social value to their work.

5.3. Precarious Position: Stable Present and Uncertain Future

Operating between government and news organizations, the work of *Xiaobian* is characterized by a state of stagnation, shaped by two key factors: the repetitive nature of content production and the absence of career advancement opportunities. As Interviewee 1 described: "Both my job position and daily tasks are fixed, with little change. Every day feels repetitive, and major events this year are just a rehash of last year's. There's no hope for career progression" (Interviewee 1).

This stagnation is largely a consequence of their marginal position between government agencies and media organizations. Lacking formal integration into either institution, they remain contract workers with limited career prospects:

> There's no path for promotion because we are outsiders to both sides. The government only sees us as temporary service providers. At the same time, we have no advancement opportunities within the media organization either, since we are not truly part of its internal operations. (Interviewee 5)

Moreover, the standardized and formulaic nature of content production reduces the need for specialized professional skills, making social media editors highly replaceable. Their job security is contingent on client

satisfaction rather than institutional stability. As Interviewee 3 noted: "The government contracts the project, not the individual. If they're dissatisfied, they can always contact the news organization and request a replacement."

Beyond the challenges of their current roles, *Xiaobian* also face uncertainty about the future. Over the past decade, the government's social media has transitioned from a phase of rapid expansion to one of steady consolidation. In 2018, the central government issued a directive emphasizing the "healthy development" of government-affiliated social media which included shutting down redundant or inactive "zombie accounts" that were not regularly updated. Since April 2024, more than 10 provincial governments have issued announcements to shut down unnecessary government social media accounts or merge them, triggering a second wave of downsizing in government-affiliated social media platforms. This policy, combined with government budget constraints, has further exacerbated job insecurity. As Interviewee 8 observed: "Recently, many government clients have claimed that their publicity budgets have been reduced, leaving them with no funds to renew outsourced contracts. They may have to take over social media operations themselves" (Interviewee 8).

Interviewee 9 similarly highlighted this trend, stressing the "budget cut of the government." The interplay between a relatively stable present and an uncertain future constrains their ability to navigate the tensions between political compliance and effective communication. The precarious nature of their employment leaves them with little room to assert editorial agency, reinforcing their position as peripheral actors within government communication and media ecosystems. Additionally, the evolving governance of state-affiliated social media in China underscores the shifting priorities of digital authoritarianism where visibility and political loyalty often take precedence over journalistic logic. As budget constraints and policy shifts continue to reshape the landscape of government social media, the role of outsourced journalists remains both structurally marginalized and susceptible to state-driven transformations.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with 15 journalistic staff assigned by a local press group to manage outsourced government social media, this study examines how journalists engage with government social media operations. We found that in the collaboration of outsourced government social media, journalists act as service providers, assisting the government in building a positive image on social media. These partnerships alleviate financial pressures for news organizations while amplifying the government's voice on social media. Operating within this hybrid space, journalistic staff, known as *Xiaobian*, face ongoing tensions between prioritizing political safety and social influence as well as between serving the state and serving the public. Their precarious employment further constrains their capacity to navigate these tensions and pursue professional autonomy. These dynamics are embedded in a semi-authoritarian governance system, where bureaucratic logic overrides professional logic in the operation of government media.

This study makes several contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it addresses an underexplored aspect of government communication—the role of journalists as contributors to outsourced government social media. While prior research has focused on the interactions between governments and citizens (Bonsón et al., 2016; Criado & Villodre, 2021; Gao & Lee, 2017), this study offers insights into the operational mechanisms behind government communication. Furthermore, contrary to the perspective that

social media adoption symbolizes modernity and transparency (Bonsón et al., 2016; Janowski, 2015), we found that government social media primarily serves to showcase official performance in a bureaucratic society characterized by hierarchical decision-making and administrative logic (Lieberthal & Lampton, 2024), echoing previous research arguing that many governments' use of social media is for symbolic and presentational purposes (DePaula et al., 2018). Under such circumstances, government social media management prioritizes political control and institutional objectives over professional media practices. When bureaucratic logic overrides professional logic, government social media tends to function primarily as a propaganda tool often resulting in low communication effectiveness—typically reflected in the low readership of published content. From this perspective, the professional autonomy of *Xiaobian* is significantly constrained, differing from the journalists who run social media accounts affiliated with the media organizations (Long & Shao, 2021). Nevertheless, some *Xiaobian* attempt to persuade government officials to adhere to professional standards, although the success of such efforts largely depends on the leadership style. It also explains why *Xiaobian* somehow derive a sense of professional identity from their work, viewing their roles as contributing to public service through government communication.

Second, this study advances the understanding of the evolving relationship between journalistic roles and government relations by focusing on journalists who operate as in-betweeners—positioned at the intersection of media organizations and government institutions. Building on scholarship addressing role conflict and shifting professional boundaries, which emphasize the negotiation of journalistic identity and practice (Fisher, 2016; Weder et al., 2023), we find that *Xiaobian* must actively manage role tensions inherent in government-affiliated social media communication. Unlike journalists who employ preventative strategies to distinguish their professional identity from PR work (Fröhlich et al., 2013; Viererbl & Koch, 2021), *Xiaobian* assume dual responsibilities encompassing both state propaganda and public information dissemination. Functioning simultaneously as facilitators and educators, they adopt flexible strategies, such as selective effort allocation, to reconcile competing demands. Operating under dominant bureaucratic logic, they reaffirm their professional identity by redefining their roles through the lens of public service, thereby attributing broader social value to their work. This aligns with a previous study arguing that journalists often perform a hybrid function, balancing normative ideals of press freedom and pragmatic constraints imposed by state and corporate actors (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

Finally, this study expands the theory of boundary work. While existing research primarily emphasizes how journalists maintain boundaries within media organizations (Carlson, 2015; Liu & Berkowitz, 2020), this study shifts the focus to outsourced actors who operate beyond traditional media institutions and navigate the reconstruction of journalistic boundaries. Our findings suggest that the dominance of governmental logic over journalistic logic has significantly reshaped these boundaries. Managing government social media accounts can no longer be considered traditional journalism. In practice, *Xiaobian* are engaged in shaping the government's public image and facilitating its self-presentation (DePaula et al., 2018), crossing the boundaries between journalism and PR (Weder et al., 2023). These boundary-crossing practices represent strategic adaptations to the economic and political pressures faced by media organizations in the digital age, reflecting a broader trend in China's media ecosystem, where outlets are progressively extending their professional domains to accommodate evolving institutional demands.

7. Limitations and Future Work

Admittedly, this study has several limitations. First, it is based on a small sample of interviews which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating larger and more diverse samples. In addition, the study focuses on outsourced government social media in a developed city. Given China's five-tier administrative system, social media accounts at the central and provincial levels often have access to dedicated management teams. Future studies could conduct large-scale surveys to offer broader insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of outsourced government social media across different administrative levels and regions. Second, beyond legacy media, some small technology companies also undertake the operation of government social media accounts. These companies often face more complex challenges, such as competing with traditional media organizations, building trust with government clients, and producing more innovative content. These dynamics merit further investigation. Finally, the operation of government social media represents a broader transformation within Chinese media. Media organizations are experimenting with various strategies, particularly those that blur traditional journalistic boundaries to survive in the digital age. Future research could pay closer attention to these peripheral practices of journalism which are becoming increasingly important to media organizations' revenue models.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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